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ACROFSKY INTERVIEW WITH  
McGEORGE BUNDY

Q Mr. Bundy, when did you learn about the reconnaissance photos that proved there were Soviet offensive missiles in Cuba?

A Of course I knew that we had been conducting reconnaissance flights, and I knew in fact for a variety of reasons about the specific flight which was going out on the Sunday.

But my first word that there was hard evidence that there were indeed missiles being installed in Cuba came in the evening of Monday -- that's Monday, the 15th of October -- by a telephone call from a colleague in the Intelligence Agency.

Q What did you do then?

A Well, I talked with him about it -- difficult to talk about these matters on the phone -- in a very

guarded way, satisfied myself that the evidence was being analyzed and put together in a form that would be important and effective for laymen, that the officers of the Government short of the President who needed to know were being informed.

And then I asked myself whether I should telephone the President that evening, and I decided not to.

Q At that time was that?

A That was about 8:30 in the evening.

Q Why did you decide not to tell the President?

A The President asked me that question several months later, Mr. Agronsky, and I am going to tell you what I told him. That this was a very important piece of information indeed and that we would need to be dead sure it was right and we would need to have the evidence in such a form that he could be sure it was right, and his principal associates; that it was not a matter of a telephone call from a professional but a matter of photographic blow-ups, and have all the proof which the analysts were indeed required to give us in the next days, and that would not be ready until the following morning.

This was not a matter which could be discussed on the telephone except in the most guarded way; that it

was a secret, that it was very important that it should stay a secret until the President decided what to do about it; that the people he would want to talk to, I happened to know because of meetings earlier that day, were scattered around town at different dinner parties; that nothing would be more dangerous to that secret than to have a sudden meeting called; that if he did not call a meeting there was nothing the President could do.

He had been out campaigning until early Monday morning, up in New York, as I recall it, and the best thing for him and the best thing for the rest of us would be to sleep on this, work on it in the morning.

I think I'd do that again. That's what I told him in early '63. He never came back to me.

Q He never made any comment?

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Q Why did you decide not to tell the President, Mr. Bundy?

A He asked me that question 2 or 3 months later, and I wrote him a memo, and let me summarize that for you.

First, this was a terribly important piece of

information, and in order for it to be available to act on we had to know it was so, not just a matter of a phone call but a matter of photographic blow-ups and other hard evidence of the hard evidence, which wouldn't be available until the next morning.

Second, it was a secret, and the fact that it was a secret was important to the decisions he would have to take.

To keep it a secret there must be no people called away from dinners, and all the people he needed were all over the town at dinners that night.

Third, he was tired from campaigning, there wasn't anything he could do that night if I telephoned him but worry about it. Better to wait until morning.

That's what I told him. He never came back to say that was wrong. I'd do it again that way.

Q When you told the President the next morning about the missiles, what was his first reaction, what orders did he give you, what information did he ask you for, whom did he ask you to call?

A Well, his first reaction was the same reaction that anyone would have who had heard about it. Let's start that again.. .....

Q When you told the President the next morning about the missiles, what was his first reaction, what orders did he give to you, what information did he want to have, whom did he ask you to call?

A Well, his first reaction was that we must make sure and were we making sure, and would there be evidence on which he could decide that this was in fact really the case.

His second reaction was that if it were so it was obviously a most serious matter and that we must act. Right from the beginning it was clear to me that in his own mind there must be action, and the question was only what kind of action.

Q It could not be tolerated that the missiles would be in there? Was that his reaction?

A That we must do something about this situation, let me put it that way, and that we must in fact act to end it. Yes, that was clear.

His next reaction was, are we studying this further, were the additional flights on order. They were.

And his next reaction was that he would like to have a meeting promptly, and he told me who to call and who to call to the meeting, which I did.

Q Mr. Bundy, you have a phrase that you use in the White House about setting trains in motion. What trains did you set in motion after that meeting at the President's request or order?

A The principal thing, as I say, was to call together the people he most wanted to consult with, make sure they were there when he was ready to talk with them, which was a little later in the morning; make sure that the photographic blow-ups and these other photographic demonstrations, - that there was indeed hard evidence, necessarily believable hard evidence, and that was about it.

From there on it was a matter of talking it out.

Q What were the courses of action that were eventually considered?

A Well, of course you could do nothing. Sometimes during the week as we looked at the possible consequences of any given course of action, all of us in different ways came back to the notion that perhaps one could live with this.

But we always discarded it, and as I say, the President discarded it from the first.

You could take a diplomatic track of protest or

complaint in the United Nations or public diplomatic process with the Soviet Union.

Then you could go to the more drastic actions, which soon sorted themselves out into three, each with variations: blockade or quarantine of this or that element of what might be coming into Cuba; an air attack pinpointed in more or less degree upon the missile installations, or an all-out invasion.

Q Was one course of action ever considered, the use of nuclear weapons on our part?

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Q What were the courses of action that were considered at that point in the crisis?

A Well, you name it and we talked about it. Running up the scale, you could start with nothing. And as we looked at the possibilities during the week, I think nearly all of us at one time or another came back to think about the possibility of just sitting still, although I must say the President, himself, from the beginning, as I have said, took an opposite view.

You could take a diplomatic course, protesting, trying to mobilize oppositions in the United Nations, in

the Security Council; raising the issue diplomatically directly with the Soviet Union.

Beyond words you could move to action. Action fell into three classes: Blockade or quarantine against some or all of the things coming into Cuba; an air attack against the missile installations or against the air complex of defense; or finally, an invasion.

Q Having considered all these courses, the President finally decided in favor of a blockade. Why?

A Well, that's an enormous question, and I can't give you but the briefest of answers.

I think his fundamental reasoning was that of all the courses available this was the one which came nearest to a balance between the requirement of putting effective political pressure upon the other side and the requirement that that pressure be placed on them in such a way as to leave an opening for peaceful settlement in which the missiles would come out of Cuba.

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Q Having considered all these courses, the President finally decided in favor of a blockade. Why?

A I think the President's objective in making his choice was to balance the requirement of a course sufficiently strong to get the missiles out against the requirement of a course which would lead the way to a peaceful solution; avoid an increase of pressures and forces that might lead to all-out war.

And I think that while he was never satisfied that any course was good, he found this one the least unsatisfactory from this point of view.

Q The President, only the President and the handful of his advisors -- he has said 15, including yourself -- were able to see the crisis in the round, in all of its aspects. Did the President -- did you at any moment feel deep down that we stood on the brink of nuclear war?

A First let me say I think only the President and not any of his advisors was able to see the thing in the round. I think that's the nature of the Presidency and the nature of the Presidential responsibility.

Then let me say that I couldn't answer for him as to how great he may have thought the danger was, because that's a lonely question.

For myself, I would say that I think the danger of an immediate nuclear action by either side was never a matter that seemed to me today or tomorrow in terms of imminence, but that what did seem highly likely, more likely than not, was that we might have a series of diplomatic and partial steps which might lead to a constant deepening crisis from which in fact we might not be able to climb out without a nuclear exchange.

Q That a process perhaps had been started which could conceivably escalate into a nuclear war, is that it?

A We were in a position in which there was a greater danger than at any time in the nuclear age that that might happen.

Q You have said, Mr. Bundy, that it wasn't nuclear war but the painful choices that might confront the United States that perhaps concerned everyone most, as, for example, Khrushchev moving against Berlin. Can you tell us about that?

A Well, when I say that nuclear war was not at any stage something that seemed likely to happen the next morning, and when I say that the real danger was a tightening

not of dangerous choice, let me give you an example.

On the Saturday morning of the second week of the crisis, the ~~opener~~ as against the secret week of the crisis, the Soviet Government proposed that they would pull their missiles out of Cuba if we would pull ours out of Greece and Turkey.

That was a possible solution in the sense that the immediate crisis would have ended, but it was the gravest kind of political danger for us because if we had done that against -- at the point of a gun in that fashion, the Atlantic Alliance might well have come unstuck from one end to another.

That's the kind of risk with which we were confronted. That is the kind of choice against which we were measuring our moves in those weeks.

Q Mr. Bundy, do you think that the President judged in evaluating Mr. Khrushchev and his policies, that Khrushchev, like himself, was seeking every way, even in the most dangerous moment of the Cuban crisis -- every way to avoid nuclear war?

----- A I don't think that's much of a question. I don't think I will deal with that. Or rather, it's too tough. I would give you an answer that wouldn't add up.

## SCENE 2 - SCENE 2

Q Mr. Bundy, at any point in this critical week did you feel that the situation was developing in such a fashion that it could begin a process that might end in nuclear war?

A Of course the whole point of the crisis was that it might end in nuclear war, but I did not feel, myself, at any point in that week that in the next 24 hours we were likely to face that particular desperate result.

The danger was that in the process of move and counter-move we might have a deepening diplomatic and military crisis and a confrontation which would move in this direction, lead us down that desperate road, and we wouldn't be able to climb back up.

I don't feel that at any point nuclear war was going to happen in the next six hours. I do think, and I think we all felt during that week that this was the nearest we'd be to a nuclear war in the age of the atom.

Q Mr. Bundy, exactly how did you find out that Khrushchev was going to take the missiles out?

A Well, we all found out by the same means, a public message broadcast over the Moscow State radio. I got

the first takes on that message as I was sitting here at breakfast in the staff room on Sunday morning. I rushed out of the room, my colleagues now tell me, telephoned the President, who was in his quarters, told him the essence of it.

He asked me to bring the message to him so that he could see it on his way to church. I did that. And we all felt that the world had changed and changed for the better.

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Well, on Sunday morning we were sitting at breakfast. It had been a terrible night, Saturday night, and we got the word, as everyone else did, by message over the Moscow State radio. I took the first takes of that message as they came out of-----

Well, on Saturday night, as you recall, tension was very high, and we went to bed feeling it was the worst night of the crisis, not knowing what the morning would bring.

Sunday morning did bring news from Khrushchev that he was taking the missiles out. I got that word, as I recall it, sitting at breakfast here. I took the first

reports, telephoned them to the President. He asked me to meet him on his way to church a little later, bring him the full message, and I did that.

Q Mr. Bundy, when you all realized that it was over, can you recollect what went on here in the White House, any conversations with the President, conversations among the staff, looking back at that past, and that you had gotten safely past that terrible moment?

A I don't recall any talk with the President about the meaning of the day because the meaning was so clear.

I do remember that it was a very beautiful morning and that it had suddenly become many times more beautiful. And I am sure the President felt the same way from the feeling between us as we talked about it.

Q Mr. Bundy, the President in a press conference that he held with the three radio and television networks said this: The Soviet missiles in Cuba seemed an effort to materially change the balance of power. They were planning in November, he said, to open to the world the fact that they had these missiles so close to the United

States. Would you comment on the fact that, as the President apparently saw it, this was a Soviet effort to do something about their missile gap rather than an effort to defend Castro?

A I think the way the President saw it and the way all of us saw it wasn't so much a narrow question of the missile balance. It was a question of a political challenge which if not met would be followed by a still graver challenge probably at Berlin.

It was really a test as to whether Khrushchev or the President would be the man of strength, the man of peace, and the man in the lead. Khrushchev intended to win. I think the President did.

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Q What were the thoughts -- what were you all thinking and talking about when you drafted the message that Sunday when the crisis at last was over?

A After the first great moments of happiness the great problem on Sunday was what the -- what the form of the American statement should be.

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Q Mr. Bundy, when you, the President, and his other advisers were drafting the message on that Sunday, after the crisis at last was passed, what were you all thinking about?

A Right from the first moment, after realizing that the danger was passed, the President insisted that we think in terms of moving onward to a lowering of danger and a lessening of tension, an easing of the crisis.

For that reason he insisted that there should not be any easy cheering about a victory, no shouting, but rather a response which would be soberly framed in terms which would permit us to go on to ease off this danger which was still very great. The bombers were there. The missiles had not yet begun to move out. We had only assurance. And to lead outward from this pit of danger toward a wider horizon of settlement and perhaps even stable peace.

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